

May 23, 2006

M. Rony Francois, M.D., M.S.P.H., Ph.D.
Secretary of Health
Florida Department of Health
4052 Bald Cypress Way
Tallahassee, FL 32399-1701

Urgent fax: 850-922-9453

Dear Dr. Francois:

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is an international nonprofit organization with more than 1 million members and supporters dedicated to the protection of animals. As you may be aware, we contacted Dr. Agwunobi in March 2005 following an outbreak of *E. coli* in which at least 60 people were sickened, including seven children who contracted hemolytic urine syndrome, after visiting petting zoos at the Central Florida Fair and Florida Strawberry Festival. In light of recent studies pertaining to the risks involved with petting zoos, we respectfully request that the Florida Department of Health issue a public health advisory recommending that citizens avoid the health risks associated with petting zoos by steering clear of these exhibits altogether.

We commend the FDH for its participation in a study that was presented at the International Conference for Emerging Infectious Diseases this past March. This study—along with two others presented at the conference, from South Carolina and Tennessee—demonstrates that current hand-washing recommendations are not protecting the public from potentially deadly illnesses when visiting petting zoos.

Additionally, a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in December 2005, “Outbreaks of *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 Associated With Petting Zoos—North Carolina, Florida, and Arizona, 2004-2005,” states that even indirect contact with animals can threaten health. In the Florida outbreak, touching soiled clothing, shoes, sawdust, or wood shavings contributed to illness. Thirty-three percent of the patients studied contracted *E. coli* by touching sawdust or shavings alone. It is unrealistic to expect families that are visiting fairs and carnivals to practice the degree of sanitation necessary to ensure that all pathogens are removed from their hands, clothing, shoes, strollers, and toys.

Judging by the fair organizers’ decision to cancel last year’s petting zoo exhibit at the Central Florida Fair and by Osceola County’s decision to eliminate the petting zoo from this year’s county fair, it is apparent that Florida citizens are concerned about the growing safety and health risks to fairgoers.



PETA

PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL
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AN INTERNATIONAL
ORGANIZATION DEDICATED
TO PROTECTING
THE RIGHTS OF ALL ANIMALS

Animals used in mobile petting zoos are subjected to the rigors of travel, confinement, and mishandling. Restricted to small pens and cages, the animals are afforded little relief from the continual stream of excited and often unintentionally rough children. Because many of the animals used in petting zoos are relatively inexpensive and therefore easily replaceable, some operators do not even bother spending money on veterinary care. At the end of the season, animals are often sent to slaughter.

I have attached a factsheet detailing the health hazards of petting zoos for your review. May we meet with you to discuss this matter further? I can be reached at 757-622-7382, extension 8285; by fax at 757-628-0781; or by e-mail at JackieV@peta.org. Thank you for your time and for your attention to this important matter.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jackie Vergerio".

Jackie Vergerio
Animals in Entertainment Specialist
Captive Animals & Entertainment Issues Department

Attachment: "Health Hazards of Petting Zoos" factsheet